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ABSTRACT

A parent involvement policy to improve public relations in a high school is examined in this report. The policy goal was to attract at least one thousand parents, approximately one-half of the parent population, to the school each year for a positive nonathletic experience. Methodology to analyze policy effectiveness involved interviews with staff members and the principal, the policy initiator, and a telephone survey of parents. Sample sizes were not listed. Low cost strategies to increase parent involvement were a principal's newsletter, an academic booster club, and parent education. Findings indicate a high level of parent and staff satisfaction with the program; however, teachers were divided on its effect on school effectiveness. The policy was considered to be successful overall, in that 70 percent of the desired number of parents participated, and 94 percent of the visitors surveyed expressed positive views of their experiences. (LMI)

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A POLICY REVIEW:
POSITIVE PARENT INVOLVEMENT POLICY
PASCO HIGH SCHOOL

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Introduction

Effective public relations is a priority with many schools and districts. Responsibility for public relations usually lies with principals and superintendents. If an expanding data base concerning attitude formation in the public sector indicates the need to develop support in the community, then the stimulation of public action that will assist schools in their quest for improvement cannot be overlooked as a policy goal for principals. A principal's policy for stimulating public support by increasing levels of parent involvement at Pasco High School will be considered here. Positive involvement is the behavior whereby parents are encouraged to support the school's effort to instill scholorship and socialization skills in the students, and to help in obtaining these products.

Purpose

It is the intent of this research project to examine Pasco High School's policy for positive parent involvement in school curriculum and activities. Organizing such a policy as a component of an overall school improvement effort was the perogative of the principal. He began to shape this policy at the beginning of his tenure as principal

in the 1982-83 school year.

The policy will be defined and reviewed in regard to the process by which it was identified as a necessary component of a school improvement effort, what steps were taken by the principal to implement the policy, and what modifications have been necessary to keep it functioning. After examining these processes the project will evaluate the perceived effectiveness of the policy by those who are responsible for its implementation and those to whom it was directed.

Research Methodology

Much of the data presented in this study were obtained from interviews with the principal of Pasco High School, Ray Reynolds, who was responsible for initiating the policy. School staff members who have been involved with the development or implementation of the positive parental involvement policy were also consulted.

Parents' attitudes concerning their involvement at Pasco High School were surveyed. A telephone survey was utilized to determine their responses to questions about their positive involvement at school functions and how they were informed about those opportunities.

Research Procedures

The development of the policy for positive parent

involvement and details concerning the process of implementation were discussed in interviews with the principal, Ray Reynolds. Supporting or conflicting data were sought from other staff members. The study includes written opinions from Reynolds.

Staff opinions regarding the policy, their part in its development and implementation, and its perceived impact upon their teaching were gathered in random inter-departmental interviews. Parent attitudes concerning the policy were polled in a telephone survey. Documents concerning this policy were collected and made available. The data were recorded in the field notes for this project and the interpretation of that data will follow in this work.

The Policy

The development of Pasco High School's parent involvement policy begins with the principal. The policy states that at least one thousand parents will come into the building each year for a positive (non-athletic) experience. Positive involvement activities were explained by the principal to include the following:

1. Scholastic Recognition Assemblies.
2. Clubs and Committees.
3. Tutoring, Chaperoning, Volunteer Efforts.
4. Classroom Visits and Observations.
5. Conferences.
6. Parent Classes.
7. Athletic Booster Activities.

With approximately 1100 students attending the school, the policy aims to reach roughly half of the possible parents.

Development of the Policy

The principal, Ray Reynolds, developed the policy on what appears to be "cumulative intuition." He had been the school's assistant principal for ten years before assuming the principalship in 1982. During that time he had developed a cumulative knowledge, or "horse sense," about the possible effects of increased parent involvement. This was based on his observations of what he termed "parent dropouts" whose disinterest in school affairs contributed to their children's lack of success in school. He also expressed the belief, based on his readings and observations, that Pasco High School's blend of students from four major racial groups, predominantly from lower socioeconomic environments, could achieve higher levels of academic success and increase attendance rates with an increase in active parent involvement.

No official data had been collected to substantiate the causes or effects of nonparticipation by parents. This data is not necessarily pertinent, however, as in this case the principal used his perogative to institute a policy he felt would be beneficial to the performance of his students. This concept could be explained by the phrase, "It couldn't hurt." An oral survey of twenty-five

teachers found unanimous consent in the belief that the school, and their ability to function within it, is improved by an increase in positive parent involvement.

Reynolds views the positive parent involvement policy as a component of the overall school improvement process.

> It's part of the whole effective schools thing. We've instituted a lot of things here that got us the Schools of Excellence award in '83. We were one of the top 86 high schools in the nation because we were always pushing for improvement.

Improvement at Pasco High School was said to include several policies such as an effort to maximize instructional time in the classroom called bell-to-bell learning, teaching skills programs, writing assignments in every area of the curriculum, and involvement with the National Endowment for the Humanities. It also includes a district-wide policy to implement Outcome Driven Education, a teaching/learning model for improved mastery of skills. Reynolds believes the parents are an additional component of improvement:

> Parent involvement is part of all that improvement. If I can get parents in here, I can talk to them and get some support going. If parents don't show, we don't have the kind of leverage I want with a kid.

To facilitate his policy, Reynolds offers parents several opportunities to visit the school each year. He states:

> I have a lot of groups they can get into, whether their kid is smart as a whip, or failing every class.

He points to responsibility-building as a key justification for the parent involvement policy when he states:

> Parent involvement gets the kids responsible. It makes the parents more responsible too. If a parent just gets in here one time and sees something positive going on, I think I can get them to be more supportive of our efforts to educate their kids.

Public perceptions of effectiveness are important to principals. They are often the first recipients of complaints and public discontent. In making a policy work, a principal sometimes uses public relations skills to reach the sphere of influence, in this case parents, that will further the successful attainment of that policy. According to Reynolds:

> If I can just get the parents in here, I can impress the hell out of them.

The Principal's Newsletter

One of the primary mechanisms used to achieve the policy is the principal's newsletter. In a position

paper titled "The Principal's Newsletter - A Vehicle For Change," Reynolds detailed a sequenced approach to communicating with parents through the mail. Copies of these letters are available in the field notes for this research.

Using an initial time frame of three years, later extended to five, parent interest was piqued through a sequence of newsletters with individual goals. The first letter explains policy goals and offers an explanatory meeting to the public.

The second newsletter is aimed at individual segments of the community that were identified by the principal as potential beneficiaries of a positive parent involvement policy. These groups were identified by race, language, and socioeconomic status, as Pasco has a diverse blend of people in these groups.

The third newsletter shows the importance of providing press releases to keep the principal's message alive via the media.

A general newsletter that develops a theme is the fourth one to be mailed, usually about a month after the first letter. Parents are informed of awards programs in this letter and the entire community is invited to be part of the school community.

Special interest newsletters allow the principal to focus on specific issues. The fifth newsletter adheres closely to the policy goal, in this case seeking 100%

attendance from the target population.

Recognition of academic success is the theme of the sixth newsletter. Parents of honor roll students were the recipients of this letter. Parents of students in remedial programs are also contacted, as seen in newsletter seven. Their input is regarded as valuable in efforts to improve their children's performance.

The eighth newsletter keeps the awareness of school success before the public eye while attending to routine communication. It also includes levy information after four paragraphs of good news about the school's high standing. The ninth newsletter helps create an attitude that keeps parents open to changes made for the sake of improvement.

Parent Perceptions

The perceptions of parents about a policy that is aimed at them are a good indicator of a policy's effectiveness. Their actual attendance is the best indicator. A telephone survey of parents of Pasco High School students indicated that 70% of those contacted had come to school last year for reasons other than athletic events. This statistic, when applied to the 1000 parent goal, would indicate that 770 parents visited the school.

The average number of visits per parent in this survey was 1.75. 50% of those surveyed said they were informed about the opportunity that led to their visit

by the school's newsletter. 100% of those who visited stated they would probably not have come without the newsletter's invitation. Of those who came to the school, 94% rated their visit as a positive experience.

Staff Perceptions

A survey of teachers at Pasco High School indicated that 90% of them were aware of the policy. 60% of the teachers recognized, and were able to enunciate their role in making the policy work. 50% rated the policy as effective in facilitating school improvement. Positive consequences, whether in student performance or teacher satisfaction, were listed by 70% of the respondents. Most felt that the policy couldn't hurt anything in their daily routine and were happy to receive any possible benefit from it.

Cost

The cost of implementing this policy was low. Using newsletters that were already sent on a routine schedule added no real cost, but added to their efficiency. The demands upon staff time were not significantly higher than what was already called for in extra-duty assignments.

Principal's Perceptions

The principal perceives the policy as being effective.

Citing observations of increased parent involvement, Reynolds used the newly formed academic booster club as an example. It was a pleasantly unexpected consequence of the policy, created to fill a need enunciated by parents after they were invited to the school for a positive idea-sharing meeting.

He also used the quarterly parenting classes as evidence of his satisfaction. Parents of students who scored below a 3.0 grade average were invited to a series of four sessions to learn about improving study skills and motivation. A records check of students whose parents attended all the sessions showed that 83% improved their grade average by at least one point in the quarter immediately following the parent involvement.

Reynolds also believes that parents have come to know him better as a result of the policy and are much quicker to call him or meet with him on attendance and counseling matters, as well as "good news" events. He also points to the regular attendance at student recognition assemblies, held in the evening, where many participants must stand because the auditorium seats only 1,234.

Reynolds views the policy as the cheapest and easiest way to improve student functioning and parent and teacher satisfaction. He believes that it improves early intervention efforts by teachers and parents, scholastically as well as behaviorally. And, as it was his perogative to

to institute the policy based on his own judgement, it is his perogative to perceive the policy as being successful, regardless of the number of parents who show up, because of the satisfactory, and sometimes unplanned, results.

Staff Satisfaction

Staff satisfaction with the policy is high primarily because they perceive positive results that do not require excessive change on their part. Teachers recognize a well-stated policy of administrative support for doing things they already believed were right: seeking parental responsibility and support. Although only half the staff rated the policy as effective in facilitating school improvement, 70% recognized positive consequences in student behavior or their own satisfaction.

Summary of Conclusions

The positive parent involvement policy at Pasco High School, from the perspectives of those at who it is aimed and those who must carry it out, provides consequences consistent with school success. The principal perceives the policy as a working part of an overall school improvement effort.

Parent satisfaction with the policy is high, and the perspective offered by parents indicates the need for a policy that actively seeks them out and asks them to

participate, rather than assuming they will do it automatically. Quite simply, parents like to be asked.

Staff members were willing to accept a policy that did not require significant change in their daily routine and had the potential to improve student behavior and parent responsibility. While opinions were split as to whether the policy actually facilitated school improvement, most teachers were satisfied with the positive consequences they were able to receive.

The cost of the policy did not create any concern. Rather than adding new expenses to the school's budget, the policy simply made more effective use of existing budget items, primarily the cost of mailing the principal's newsletter.

The policy's ability to draw parent's of low achieving students for parenting classes was noted. This effort resulted in higher grade averages for the children of most of those who attended the classes. This consequence contributed to principal, staff, and parent satisfaction.

A policy of this type can be a no-lose situation for a principal. It is possible to say the policy has not been effective because the survey indicated only 70% of the desired number of parents participated. However, a principal has the ability to use that figure to his advantage, stating the benefits of 70% participation! The fact that 94% of the visitors surveyed listed their experience as positive is also an indicator of success.

Recommendations

School improvement efforts are many and varied. Most school's want to show continuous progress in measurable areas of performance. Any policy that can further these efforts without excessive cost, effort, or hindrance to the teaching process should be considered for implementation.

In the case of Pasco High School, the fact that the positive parent involvement policy has brought consequences that are perceived as satisfactory to staff and parents speaks for its continuation.

Verification of parent attendance figures might be improved with informal head counts at various events or, perhaps, with a mail-in survey in one of the regular newsletters. The newsletters themselves are one of the easiest and most effective methods for reaching a large audience and should be continued.

Efforts to draw in parents of students of varying ethnic groups and varying grade levels have met with their intended outcome and their continuance, under this policy, is a viable component of school improvement.

Increased data collection should not be necessary unless the policy becomes more formal. It functions adequately as an informal policy. If an increase of dissatisfaction is perceived in academic achievement, ethnic compatibility, or the behavior of parents, staff, or students, then an increase in data collection and research might be warranted to determine the effectiveness of parental involvement in dealing with said dissatisfaction.